

# Leadership Training Empowering Rural Women towards Governance and Business Management in Kenya's Coastal Blue Economy.

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**Abstract**— Women play a central role in Kenya's coastal blue economy, yet structural gender inequities limit their participation in governance and enterprise management. This study investigates the role of targeted leadership training in empowering rural women to assume governance roles and strengthen business management capabilities within women-led Savings and Credit Cooperatives (SACCOs) in Kilifi and Kwale counties. Using a case study of 23 SACCO leaders, data were collected via semi-structured questionnaires assessing governance, business planning, and strategic management competencies. Results indicate that leadership training significantly enhanced women's confidence in establishing governance structures, engaging stakeholders, forming strategic partnerships, and developing business plans, pitch decks, and Business Model Canvases. The training facilitated a shift from informal economic participation to recognized cooperative leadership and entrepreneurial engagement, highlighting the mutually reinforcing relationship between governance capacity and enterprise performance. Findings underscore the importance of embedding leadership development into women's economic empowerment and blue economy initiatives to promote inclusive, sustainable, and gender-responsive coastal development. The study contributes empirical evidence that targeted, context-specific leadership training is a transformative tool for advancing rural women's agency, governance legitimacy, and economic outcomes.

**Keywords:** Rural Women, Leadership Training, Cooperative Governance, Economic Ownership, Blue Economy, Kenya

## 1. Introduction

Kenya's legal and policy frameworks, such as the constitution and the two-thirds gender principle, aim to promote gender equity and address deeply rooted socio-cultural and economic barriers that limit women's participation in governance and local development processes (Minja et al., 2025), which is especially relevant for the coastal region in Kenya. Women account for 75.2% of farmers and contribute significantly to fisheries, seaweed farming, coastal agriculture, and small-scale marine enterprises in Kenya (Mirera D. et al., 2020). However, they face structural gender inequities, which continue to hinder their participation in economic decision-making and governance spaces within blue economy sectors (FAO, 2020).

Globally, the Blue Economy is increasingly recognized as a driver for sustainable development, climate resilience, and livelihood diversification (Pharos Project, 2024; Muigua, 2024). Kenya's coastline encompasses an Exclusive Economic Zone of 142,400 km<sup>2</sup>, presenting significant potential to expand women's participation in areas such as artisanal fisheries, coastal tourism, aquaculture, and marine resource management (Rasowo, et al., 2020). However, despite women's current contribution, their participation in these sectors remains low due to limited access to training, weak representation in resource-governance institutions such as Beach Management Units, and persistent gender norms that restrict leadership aspirations (Anuradha, 2025).

Kenya's Blue Economy and Fisheries Strategic Plan 2023-2027 underscore the need for inclusive frameworks that harness local knowledge and ensure that economic outcomes are equitably distributed between both men and women. Evidence shows that without

intentional inclusion strategies, the blue economy opportunities risk widening gender disparities (UN Women, 2020) by limiting women to low-value post-harvest roles and excluding them from high-potential sectors such as finfish farming (2X Global, n.d.), which undermines progress toward achieving SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

In rural settings, imbalanced power dynamics continue to widen inequities by limiting women's autonomy and restricting their participation in community leadership, governance structures, and enterprise management, therefore delaying progress toward inclusive development (UN Women 2020). In response to this, empowerment frameworks such as the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPS) for the private sector by the UN Women and Kenya's Women Economic Empowerment Strategy 2020-2025 have been instrumental in addressing these gender gaps by promoting the advancement of women through interventions in welfare, access, conscientization, mobilization, and control.

Leadership training thus becomes a transformative intervention, equipping rural women with the skills, confidence, and institutional awareness necessary to participate effectively in governance structures and influence resource management decisions that directly affect their livelihoods (GLOW, 2024). It involves equipping rural women with leadership knowledge and technical skills, which results in them influencing decision-making processes and managing community-based structures. Such a targeted approach challenges long-established power dynamics and fosters inclusive local governance.

Multiple studies highlight the effectiveness

of leadership training initiatives targeting rural women. In Odisha, India, technical capacity-building for women-led self-help groups engaged in aquaculture significantly improved household income, strengthened food security, and enhanced women's roles in community management (Dubey et al., 2024). Similarly, in South Africa, specialized leadership development has been identified as a key component of comprehensive strategies aimed at addressing entrenched gender biases in educational leadership among women heading rural primary schools (Nhlumayo & Nkosi, 2024). In Kenya, evidence suggests that strengthening women's leadership across multiple levels of the health sector contributes to improved system resilience and enhances overall health system responsiveness (Dhatt et al. 2017). These studies underscore the effectiveness of targeted capacity strengthening in rural women, catalyzing empowerment. Despite these promising initiatives, evidence gaps have remained on how leadership capacity strengthening translates into measurable outcomes for rural women in governance, enterprise management, and ownership of economic resources, particularly in Kenya. Understanding the impact of leadership capacity strengthening rural women's actual participation in decision-making and their control over assets and organizations is important because it reveals whether training translates into tangible power shifts or remains superficial (Katrina K., 2025).

This paper explores a targeted leadership training initiative within the Blue Empowerment Project (2025), a gender-transformative intervention aimed at promoting equitable leadership outcomes. This project sought to address barriers to women's empowerment within the aquaculture sector of Kilifi and Kwale Counties, home to aquaculture-reliant rural communities, where

women are actively engaged in fish and seaweed farming.

In mid-March 2025, the project conducted a capacity needs assessment among these rural women in the two counties, with the aim of identifying capability gaps in their newly formed Savings and Credit Cooperatives (SACCO) with members working in the blue economy. The assessment covered governance, business development, and networking. Responses from that assessment indicated that a majority have little to no confidence and proficiency in these areas, which resulted in the project organizing a structured leadership training program focused on SACCO governance, financial management, business planning, and leadership development, which the interim managing executives of the newly formed SACCOS underwent.

This paper aims to investigate the role of leadership training in rural women's empowerment with a keen focus on how it enhances their participation in governance and business management. It is guided by two key research questions: how does leadership training enable rural women to assume governance roles? and how does leadership training translate into improved business management capabilities among rural women?

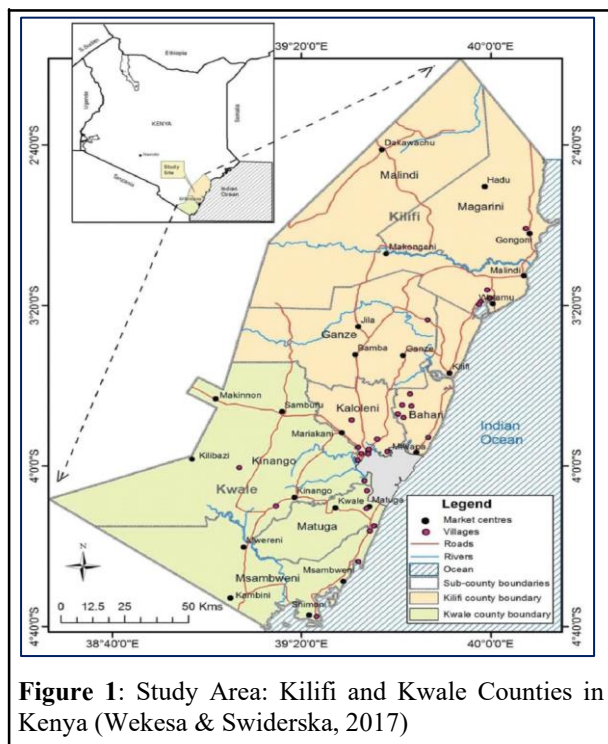
Organized into six sections, this paper begins with the introduction, proceeds to the methodology, then presents the results and discussion, and lastly the conclusion.

## 2. Material and Methods

### 2.1 Study area

The study was conducted in Kilifi and Kwale counties, located along Kenya's coastal region, as illustrated in Figure 1. Both counties have vibrant marine aquaculture activities. These sites were purposively selected due to their high

concentration of rural women participating in marine aquaculture and their inclusion as project sites under the Blue Empowerment Projects.



## 2.2 Research Design

The study employed the case selection methodology (Seawright et al., 2016), which enables a deeper understanding of the broader population of rural women in Kenya. This approach ensures that the selected case effectively represents the larger population, thereby providing insights that can be generalized beyond the study sites.

The selected case consists of a cohort of fisherwomen who participated in a one-week, women-led SACCO leadership training organized by the Blue Empowerment Project. The training specifically targeted SACCO executives from newly established cooperatives under the project. A total of 23 participants from Kilifi and Kwale attended the leadership training, and they became the target subjects in this study, adopting a total

population approach. This method ensured comprehensive coverage of all individuals who directly benefited from the intervention, thereby enhancing internal validity within the case context.

## 2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data was collected using hard copy semi-structured questionnaires because of study subjects' varying literacy levels and digital access limitations. The questionnaire focused on individual competence assessment in SACCO governance and business development. For participants unable to read the English language used in the questionnaire, field officers provided reading and writing support to ensure accurate data was captured, as consented by the subjects.

The filled-in questionnaires were collected, and responses were inputted into a Microsoft Excel sheet for analysis. A descriptive statistical approach was applied, using frequency distributions and confidence rating scales to interpret the self-assessed capabilities across the leadership and business domains. Data visualization was done using graphs and charts to enhance the presentation of the findings.

## 2.4 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards and was conducted in alignment with the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) guidelines. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and a confidentiality clause was included in the questionnaire. Participant responses were undisclosed and handled with care to ensure their dignity, privacy, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the study.

## 2.5 Study Limitations

This research is based on a single case, which is the rural women SACCO leaders trained under the Blue Empowerment Project; hence, the findings may not be generalized across all rural women or aquaculture initiatives in Kenya.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Demographic Representation in the Leadership Training

Participants were drawn from four newly formed women-led SACCOs, namely Tushirikiane, Jitihada, Kilifi North, and Kilifi South. At the time of the study, these SACCOs were not yet registered. The women-led SACCOs emerged as outcomes of the Blue Empowerment project's interventions, which focused on women's empowerment and the economic development of coastal fisher

communities.

The leadership training engaged a demographically diverse cohort in terms of gender and age. Women constituted 74% of the participants across both counties, and the age distribution ranged from youth to older adults, as illustrated in Table 1. From the SACCOs, nominated officials to members were present (Table 2). This balanced composition of participants reflects a deliberate inclusion.

As illustrated in Table 1, most participants demonstrated good proficiency in English across reading, writing, and speaking skills. The training was delivered primarily in English, the global official language of governance, with supplementary use of the national language, Swahili, to accommodate the linguistic profiles of rural women along the Kenyan coast.

**Table 1:** Participants' Demographic Information.

			GENDER	AGES		LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	
				< 35 Years	> 35 Years	English	Swahili
KWALE COUNTY	Tushirikiane SACCO	Female	4	2	2	Good	Good
		Male	5	1	4	Good	Excellent
	Jitihada SACCO	Female	4	2	2	Good	Excellent
		Male	1	-	1	Excellent	Excellent
KILIFI COUNTY	Kilifi North SACCO	Female	4	4	-	Average	Good
		Male	-	-	-	-	-
	Kilifi South SACCO	Female	5	3	2	Good	Excellent
		Male	-	-	-	-	-
Total Participants			23				

**Table 2:** Nominated SACCO Officials Present

		NOMINATED SACCO OFFICIALS PRESENT							
		CEO	Chairman	Vice Chairman	Secretary	Treasurer	Member	Secretary, Education Dept.	No Input
Tushirikian e SACCO	<b>Female</b>	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	-
	<b>Male</b>	-	-	1	1	-	1	1	1
Jitihada SACCO	<b>Female</b>	1	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
	<b>Male</b>	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Kilifi North SACCO	<b>Female</b>	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	-
	<b>Male</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kilifi South SACCO	<b>Female</b>	-	1	1	1	1	1	-	-
	<b>Male</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

### 3.2 Leadership training enabled rural women to assume governance roles

The targeted leadership training significantly enhanced the confidence of the rural women, with 83% rating themselves as averagely to very confident in establishing governance structures for blue economy-focused SACCOs. It includes explaining the SACCO governance structure, pillars of good governance, governance tools, qualities, roles and responsibilities of the board, importance of good governance to the SACCO and effects of bad governance, and the role of government in ensuring good governance.

Findings also indicate that leadership training improved the rural women's confidence in designing strategies for effective and beneficial SACCO partnerships. As shown in Table 3, 70% rated themselves as averagely confident in developing strategies

to support successful partnerships that contribute to good SACCO governance.

Confidence among the rural women in identifying and mapping SACCO stakeholders increased following the leadership training. 61% of participants rated themselves as averagely confident and 35% as very confident, demonstrating an enhanced ability to support effective SACCO governance and its growth.

The rural women present, who were also nominated SACCO officials, had their level of confidence increased by the leadership training, resulting in proactively engaging the present Kwale & Kilifi County cooperative officers and scheduling SACCO formal registration processes to commence official cooperative operations.

**Table 3:** Confidence Ratings in blue economy–focused cooperative governance

Confidence Rating in Cooperative Governance	No Response (0)		Not Confident (1)		Averagely Confident (2)		Very Confident (3)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Confidence in developing a SACCO governance structure.	4	17.4%	-	-	9	39.1%	10	43.5%
Confident in designing strategies that drive successful partnerships with their SACCOs.	3	13%	-	-	16	69.6%	4	17.4%
Confidence in identifying and mapping SACCO stakeholders.	1	4.3%	-	-	14	60.9%	8	34.8%

### 3.3 Leadership training translating into improved business management capabilities for rural women

The rural women operate blue economy–focused businesses centered on the sale of value-added products from fish and seaweed, with personal care items representing the primary seaweed-based products and fillets and fried fish the main fish-based offerings.

Our study found that the leadership training equipped and significantly built up the confidence of rural women, with 78% rating themselves as averagely to very confident in pitch deck development and presentation of their blue economy-focused businesses, giving them a competitive advantage in the market.

Findings on developing a Business Model Canvas for their blue economy-focused businesses showed that the targeted leadership training strengthened their confidence level, with 87% of them rating themselves averagely confident to very confident (Table 4). The most challenging areas identified while developing the BMC were “cost structure” and “revenue streams,” while “customer segments” and “channels” were rated the easiest to populate.

A significant enhancement in confidence related to business plan development for their blue economy–focused enterprises was observed among the rural women, with 96% rating themselves as average to very confident, indicating an improvement in their business management capabilities.

**Table 4:** Confidence Ratings in blue economy–focused cooperative governance

Confidence Rating in Economic Ownership	No Response (0)		Not Confident (1)		Averagely Confident (2)		Very Confident (3)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Confidence in Business Pitching.	3	13%	2	8.7%	11	47.8%	7	30.4%
Confidence in building a Business Model Canvas for your business	2	8.7%	1	4.3%	12	52.2%	8	34.8%
Confidence in developing a business plan for your business.	1	4.3%	-	-	18	78.3%	4	17.4%

#### 4. Discussion

This study investigated the role of leadership training in enabling rural women to assume governance roles and in strengthening business management capabilities within women-led, blue economy focused SACCOs along Kenya's coast. The findings indicate that targeted leadership training serves as a critical enabling mechanism, enhancing women's governance confidence, institutional engagement, and managerial competencies, particularly in contexts where women have been historically underrepresented in formal economic and decision-making structures.

##### 4.1 Leadership Training and Rural Women's Assumption of Governance Roles

The results indicate that targeted leadership training significantly enhanced rural women's confidence and preparedness to engage in cooperative governance. The finding that 83% of participants rated themselves as averagely to very confident in establishing SACCO governance structures suggests that targeted leadership interventions address both informational barriers that have historically limited women's participation in formal governance spaces. Recent studies emphasize that women's underrepresentation in cooperative and local economic governance is often driven by limited access to governance knowledge, institutional exposure, and leadership skills rather than lack of interest or capability (World Bank, 2023).

By systematically covering SACCO governance structures, board roles and responsibilities, pillars of good governance, and the implications of poor governance, the training demystified institutional processes that are often perceived as technical or exclusionary, enhancing women's sense of legitimacy as governance actors. This finding aligns with

contemporary empowerment frameworks that conceptualize leadership training as a pathway to strengthening women's agency and institutional legitimacy (Kabeer, 2020; UN Women, 2023). Increased confidence observed among rural women participants reflects not only gains in knowledge but also a transformation in self-perception, whereby rural women transition from being passive recipients of development interventions to recognized and legitimate actors in cooperative governance. This shift from passive participation to active governance engagement represents a critical milestone for the effectiveness and sustainability of women-led cooperatives.

The deliberate inclusion of both nominated SACCO officials and general members across different age groups further strengthened collective governance capacity. Inclusive training approaches are particularly important in cooperative settings, where accountability and transparency depend on shared understanding rather than concentration of power among a few elites, particularly in early stages of formation (ILO, 2022). Additionally, the bilingual delivery of the leadership training, which was done primarily in English with support from the Swahili language, likely enhanced accessibility while equipping the rural women with the language skills required to engage with regulatory and administrative actors. Language accessibility remains a critical but often overlooked determinant of women's effective participation in governance in rural contexts (UNDP, 2022).

Enhanced confidence in stakeholder mapping and partnership development further indicates that leadership training expanded rural women's understanding of governance as a relational and strategic process. The proactive engagement of nominated SACCO officials with county cooperative officers following the

leadership training provides evidence that confidence gains translated into concrete governance action. Such movement from capacity-building to institutional engagement is widely recognized as a key indicator of effective leadership development interventions (OECD, 2021).

#### **4.2 Leadership Training and Improved Business Management Capabilities**

Beyond governance outcomes, the findings demonstrate that targeted leadership training translated into improved business management capabilities among rural women. High confidence levels in pitch deck development, Business Model Canvas (BMC) formulation, and business plan development indicates strengthened strategic thinking, communication, and planning skills, which are core competencies for enterprise sustainability and growth. Recent literature underscores that leadership and managerial skills are critical for women entrepreneurs' competitiveness, particularly in value-added and emerging sectors such as the blue economy fisheries and seaweed value chains (FAO, 2022; UN Women, 2024).

Confidence in pitch deck development equips rural women to engage more effectively with buyers, financiers, and development partners, addressing a persistent barrier to women's enterprise growth. The World Bank (2023) highlights that women entrepreneurs frequently face structural disadvantages in securing capital, often linked to limited exposure to formal business communication and negotiation processes. Leadership training that incorporates pitching and presentation skills can therefore enhance rural women's visibility and bargaining power within competitive markets.

The strong confidence reported in developing Business Model Canvases suggests

that participants developed a more holistic understanding of how their enterprises create, deliver, and capture value. The challenges identified in articulating cost structures and revenue streams are consistent with broader evidence on rural women entrepreneurs, who often operate in unstable market conditions with limited financial literacy and fluctuating input costs (IFAD, 2021; FAO, 2022). Conversely, the relative ease of identifying customer segments and channels reflects strong experiential market knowledge rooted in everyday trading practices. Leadership training thus appears to complement informal business experience with formal planning tools, enabling rural women to better structure and potentially scale their blue enterprises.

The substantial increase in confidence related to business plan development amongst 96% of the participants further underscores the role of leadership training in enhancing rural women's managerial agency. Business planning requires forward-looking decision-making, risk assessment, and strategic prioritization which are capabilities closely associated with leadership rather than technical production alone. This supports recent findings that leadership-oriented capacity-building has stronger and more sustained impacts on women's enterprise outcomes than skills training delivered in isolation (ILO, 2022; UN Women, 2024).

#### **4.3 Linking Governance Capacity and Enterprise Performance in the Blue Economy**

The findings highlight a reinforcing relationship between governance capacity and business management capability. Strong cooperative governance provides the institutional foundation for transparency, accountability, and strategic oversight, while improved business

skills enhance the economic viability of SACCO members. Leadership training therefore operates at the intersection of institutional development and enterprise growth, supporting rural women's empowerment at both collective and individual levels.

In the context of the blue economy, where women's contributions are often informal and undervalued despite their central role in fisheries and seaweed value chains, these outcomes are particularly significant. Recent blue economy scholarship emphasizes that inclusive governance and women's leadership are essential for achieving sustainability, equity, and resilience in coastal economies (UNEP, 2021; FAO, 2022). By equipping rural women with governance and business leadership skills, the training supported their transition from peripheral economic actors to recognized cooperative leaders and entrepreneurs. This aligns with broader development literature emphasizing that women's economic empowerment requires simultaneous investments in skills, institutions, and agency (UN Women, 2020).

#### 4.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

The study underscores the importance of integrating leadership training into women's economic empowerment and cooperative development initiatives, particularly in coastal and rural contexts. Capacity-building efforts that focus solely on technical or income-generating skills may be insufficient if rural women lack the governance and leadership capabilities required to manage collective enterprises. Policymakers and development practitioners should therefore prioritize leadership training as a core investment that strengthens both institutional resilience and enterprise performance.

The early engagement between women-led SACCOs and county cooperative officers further highlights the value of aligning grassroots women's initiatives with formal governance systems. Supporting such linkages can accelerate cooperative formalization, enhance regulatory compliance, and improve access to public and financial services.

#### 5. Limitations and Future Research

While the findings provide valuable insights, the study relies primarily on self-reported confidence measures captured shortly after the training. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to assess whether increased confidence translates into sustained improvements in women-led SACCO governance effectiveness, financial performance, and household-level outcomes.

Incorporating cooperative governance and business management outcome objective indicators, such as cooperative compliance records, financial statements, loan repayment rates, member retention, and enterprise profitability, would strengthen causal claims regarding the impact of leadership training.

#### 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that leadership training is a critical enabler of rural women's participation in governance within women-led, blue economy-focused SACCOs. By building governance knowledge, leadership confidence, and institutional awareness, leadership training enables women to move from informal involvement to active and legitimate governance engagement. Increased confidence in establishing governance structures, engaging regulatory actors, mapping stakeholders, and forming strategic partnerships highlights how leadership training supports women's transition

into decision-making roles during the formative stages of cooperative development.

The study also shows that leadership training translates into improved business management capabilities among rural women engaged in fish and seaweed value chains. Enhanced confidence in business pitching, business model canvas development, and business planning reflects strengthened strategic thinking and managerial competence.

Together, these findings illustrate that leadership training simultaneously strengthens cooperative governance and enterprise performance, underscoring its importance as a holistic empowerment strategy for advancing women's economic participation and leadership within Kenya's blue economy.

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#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, Methodology: BM, JO.

Data curation: BM, BS, MK,

Writing original draft preparation: BM, JO, MK,

Visualization, Investigation: BM, BS, JO, MK,

Supervision: JO, BS

Final version reviewing and editing: BM, BS, JO.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no known financial or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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